

*Administration of Barack Obama, 2011*

**Remarks at the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation Phoenix Awards  
Dinner**

*September 24, 2011*

Hello, CBC! Thank you so much. Thank you. Please, everybody have a seat. It is wonderful to be with all of you tonight. It's good to be with "the conscience of the Congress." Thank you, Chairman Cleaver and brother Payne, for all that you do each and every day. Thank you, Dr. Elsie Scott, president and CEO of the CBC Foundation, and all of you for your outstanding work with your internship program, which has done so much for so many young people. And I had a chance to meet some of the young people backstage, an incredible, unbelievably impressive group.

You know, being here with all of you, with all the outstanding Members of the Congressional Black Caucus, reminds me of a story that one of our friends, a giant of the civil rights movement, Reverend Dr. Joseph Lowery, told one day. Dr. Lowery, I don't think he minds me telling that he turns 90 in a couple weeks. He's been causing a ruckus for about 89 of those years. *[Laughter]*

A few years back, Dr. Lowery and I were together at Brown Chapel AME Church in Selma. *[Applause]* We've got some Selma folks in the house. And Dr. Lowery stood up in the pulpit and told the congregation the story of Shadrach and Meshach and Abed-nego in the fiery furnace. You know the story: It's about three young men bold enough to stand up for God, even if it meant being thrown in a furnace. And they survived because of their faith and because God showed up in that furnace with them.

Now, Dr. Lowery said that those three young men were a little bit crazy. But there's a difference, he said, between good crazy and bad crazy. Those boys, he said, were good crazy. At the time, I was running for President; it was early in the campaign. Nobody gave me much of a chance. He turned to me from the pulpit and indicated that someone like me running for President, well, that was crazy. *[Laughter]* But he supposed it was good crazy.

He was talking about faith, the belief in things not seen, the belief that if you persevere, a better day lies ahead. And I suppose the reason I enjoy coming to the CBC—what this weekend is all about—is you and me, we're all a little bit crazy, but hopefully, a good kind of crazy. We're a good kind of crazy because no matter how hard things get, we keep the faith, we keep fighting, we keep moving forward.

And we've needed faith over these last couple years. Times have been hard. It's been 3 years since we faced down a crisis that began on Wall Street and then spread to Main Street and hammered working families and hammered an already hard-hit Black community. The unemployment rate for Black folks went up to nearly 17 percent, the highest it's been in almost three decades. Forty percent, almost, of African American children living in poverty, fewer than half convinced that they can achieve Dr. King's dream. You've got to be a little crazy to have faith during such hard times.

It's heartbreaking, and it's frustrating. And I ran for President and the Members of the CBC ran for Congress to help more Americans reach that dream. We ran to give every child a chance, whether he's born in Chicago or she comes from a rural town in the Delta. This crisis has made that job of giving everybody opportunity a little bit harder.

We knew at the outset of my Presidency that the economic calamity we faced wasn't caused overnight and wasn't going to be solved overnight. We knew that long before the recession hit, the middle class in this country had been falling behind: wages and incomes had been stagnant; a sense of financial security had been slipping away. And since these problems were not caused overnight, we knew we were going to have to climb a steep hill.

But we got to work. With your help, we started fighting our way back from the brink. And at every step of the way, we've faced fierce opposition based on an old idea, the idea that the only way to restore prosperity can't just be to let every corporation write its own rules or give out tax breaks to the wealthiest and the most fortunate and to tell everybody that they're on their own. There has to be a different concept of what America's all about. It has to be based on the idea that I am my brother's keeper and I am my sister's keeper and we're in this together. [Applause] We are in this thing together.

We had a different vision, and so we did what was right, and we fought to extend unemployment insurance, and we fought to expand the earned-income tax credit, and we fought to expand the child tax credit, which benefited nearly half of all African American children in this country. And millions of Americans are better off because of that fight.

Ask the family struggling to make ends meet if that extra few hundred dollars in their mother's paycheck from the payroll tax cut we passed made a difference. They'll tell you. Ask them how much that earned-income tax credit or that child tax credit makes a difference in paying the bills at the end of the month.

When an army of lobbyists and special interests spent millions to crush Wall Street reform, we stood up for what was right. We said the time has come to protect homeowners from predatory mortgage lenders. The time has come to protect consumers from credit card companies that jacked up rates without warning. We signed the strongest consumer financial protection in history. That's what we did together.

Remember how many years we tried to stop big banks from collecting taxpayer subsidies for student loans, while the cost of college kept slipping out of reach? Together, we put a stop to that once and for all. We used those savings to make college more affordable. We invested in early childhood education and community college and HBCUs. Ask the engineering student at an HBCU who thought he might have to leave school if that extra Pell grant assistance mattered.

We're attacking the cycle of poverty that steals the future from too many children, not just by pouring money into a broken system, but by building on what works: with Promise Neighborhoods modeled after the good work up in Harlem; Choice Neighborhoods rebuilding crumbling public housing into communities of hope and opportunity; Strong Cities, Strong Communities, our partnership with local leaders in hard-hit cities like Cleveland and Detroit. And we overcame years of inaction to win justice for Black farmers because of the leadership of the CBC and because we had an administration that was committed to doing the right thing.

And against all sorts of setbacks, when the opposition fought us with everything they had, we finally made clear that in the United States of America nobody should go broke because they get sick. We are better than that. And today, insurance companies can no longer drop or deny your coverage for no good reason. In just a year and a half, about 1 million more young adults have health insurance because of this law—1 million young people. That is an incredible achievement, and we did it with your help, with the CBC's help.

So in these hard years, we've won a lot of fights that needed fighting, and we've done a lot of good. But we've got more work to do. So many people are still hurting. So many people are still barely hanging on. And too many people in this city are still fighting us every step of the way.

So I need your help. We have to do more to put people to work right now. We've got to make that everyone in this country gets a fair shake and a fair shot and a chance to get ahead. And I know we won't get where we need to go if we don't travel down this road together. I need you with me.

That starts with getting this Congress to pass the "American Jobs Act." You heard me talk about this plan when I visited Congress a few weeks ago and sent the bill to Congress a few days later. Now I want that bill back, passed. I've got the pens all ready, I am ready to sign it, and I need your help to make it happen.

Right now we've got millions of construction workers out of a job. So this bill says, let's put those men and women back to work in their own communities rebuilding our roads and our bridges. Let's give these folks a job rebuilding our schools. Let's put these folks to work rehabilitating foreclosed homes in the hardest hit neighborhoods of Detroit and Atlanta and Washington. This is a no-brainer.

Why should we let China build the newest airports, the fastest railroads? Tell me why our children should be allowed to study in a school that's falling apart? I don't want that for my kids or your kids. I don't want that for any kid. You tell me how it makes sense when we know that education is the most important thing for success in the 21st century. Let's put our people back to work doing the work America needs done. Let's pass this jobs bill.

We've got millions of unemployed Americans and young people looking for work, but running out of options. So this jobs bill says, let's give them a pathway, a new pathway back to work. Let's extend unemployment insurance so that more than 6 million Americans don't lose that lifeline. But let's also encourage reforms that help the long-term unemployed keep their skills sharp and get a foot in the door. Let's give summer jobs for low-income youth that don't just give them their first paycheck, but arm them with the skills they need for life.

Tell me why we don't want the unemployed back in the workforce as soon as possible. Let's pass this jobs bill, put these folks back to work.

Why are we shortchanging our children when we could be putting teachers back in the classroom right now, where they belong; laying off teachers, laying off police officer, laying off firefighters all across the country because State and local budgets are tough? Why aren't we helping? We did in the first 2 years. And then this other crowd came into Congress, and now suddenly they want to stop. Tell me why we shouldn't give companies tax credits for hiring the men and women who've risked their lives for this country, our veterans. There is no good answer for that. They shouldn't be fighting to find a job when they come home.

These Republicans in Congress like to talk about job creators. How about doing something real for job creators? Pass this jobs bill, and every small-business owner in America, including 100,000 Black-owned businesses, will get a tax cut. You say you're the party of tax cuts. Pass this jobs bill, and every worker in America, including nearly 20 million African American workers, will get a tax cut. Pass this jobs bill and prove you'll fight just as hard for a tax cut for ordinary folks as you do for all your contributors.

These are questions that opponents of this jobs plan will have to answer, because the kinds of ideas in this plan in the past have been supported by both parties. Suddenly, Obama is proposing it, what happened? *[Laughter]* What happened? You all used to like to build roads. *[Laughter]* Right? What happened? Reverend, you know what happened? I don't know. They used to love to build some roads. *[Laughter]*

Now, I know some of our friends across the aisle won't support any new spending that's not paid for. I agree that's important. So last week, I laid out a plan to pay for the "American Jobs Act" and to bring out—down our debt over time. You say the deficit is important? Here we go. I'm ready to go. It's a plan that says if we want to create jobs and close this deficit, then we've got to ask the folks who have benefited most—the wealthiest Americans, the biggest, most profitable corporations—to pay their fair share.

We are not asking them to do anything extraordinary. The reform we're proposing is based on a simple principle: Middle class folks should not pay higher tax rates than millionaires and billionaires. That's not crazy, or it's good crazy. *[Laughter]* Warren Buffett's secretary shouldn't pay a higher tax rate than Warren Buffett. A teacher or a nurse or a construction worker making \$50,000 a year shouldn't pay higher tax rates than somebody making \$50 million. That's just common sense.

We're not doing this to punish success. This is the land of opportunity. I want you to go out, start a business, get rich, build something. Our country is based on the belief that anybody can make it if they put in enough sweat and enough effort. That is wonderful. God bless you. But part of the American idea is also that once we've done well we should pay our fair share, to make sure that those schools that we were learning in can teach the next generation, that those roads that we benefited from, that they're not crumbling for the next bunch of folks who are coming behind us, to keep up the Nation that made our success possible.

And most wealthy Americans would agree with that. But you know the Republicans are already dusting off their old talking points. That's class warfare, they say. In fact, in the next breath, they'll complain that people living in poverty—people who suffered the most over the past decade—don't pay enough in taxes. That's bad crazy. *[Laughter]* When you start saying, at a time when the top one-tenth of 1 percent has seen their incomes go up four or five times over the last 20 years and folks at the bottom have seen their incomes decline, and your response is that you want poor folks to pay more? Give me a break. If asking a billionaire to pay the same tax rate as a janitor makes me a warrior for the working class, I wear that with a badge of honor. I have no problem with that. It's about time.

They say it kills jobs: "Oh, that's going to kill jobs." We're not proposing anything other than returning to the tax rates for the wealthiest Americans that existed under Bill Clinton. I played golf with Bill Clinton today. I was asking him, "How did that go?" *[Laughter]* Well, it turns out, we had a lot of jobs. The well-to-do, they did even better. So did the middle class. We lifted millions out of poverty. And then we cut taxes for folks like me, and we went through a decade of zero job growth.

So this isn't speculation. We've tested this out. We tried their theory. Didn't work. Tried our theory. It worked. We shouldn't be confused about this.

This debate is about priorities. If we want to create new jobs and close the deficit and invest in our future, the money has got to come from somewhere. And so should we keep tax loopholes for big oil companies, or should we put construction workers and teachers back on the job? Should we keep tax breaks for millionaires and billionaires, or should we invest in our

children's education and college aid? Should we ask seniors to be paying thousands of dollars more for Medicare, as the House Republicans proposed, or take young folks' health care away, or should we ask that everybody pay their fair share? This is about fairness. And this is about who we are as a country. This is about our commitment to future generations.

When Michelle and I think about where we came from—a little girl on the South Side of Chicago, son of a single mom in Hawaii—mother had to go to school on scholarships, sometimes got food stamps. Michelle's parents never owned their own home until she had already graduated, living upstairs above the aunt who actually owned the house. We are here today only because our parents and our grandparents, they broke their backs to support us. But they also understood that they would get a little bit of help from their country. Because they met their responsibilities, this country would also be responsible, would also provide good public schools, would also provide recreation parks that were safe, making sure that they could take the bus without getting beat over the head, making sure that their kids would be able to go to college even if they weren't rich.

We're only here because past generations struggled and sacrificed for this incredible, exceptional idea that it does not matter where you come from, it does not matter where you're born, doesn't matter what you look like; if you're willing to put in an effort, you should get a shot. You should get a shot at the American Dream.

And each night, when we tuck in our girls at the White House, I think about keeping that dream alive for them and for all of our children. And that's now up to us. And that's hard. This is harder than it's been in a long, long time. We're going through something we haven't seen in our lifetimes.

And I know at times that gets folks discouraged. I know. I listen to some of you all. [*Laughter*] I understand that. And nobody feels that burden more than I do. Because I know how much we have invested in making sure that we're able to move this country forward. But you know, more than a lot of other folks in this country, we know about hard. The people in this room know about hard. And we don't give in to discouragement.

Throughout our history, change has often come slowly. Progress often takes time. We take a step forward; sometimes we take two steps back. Sometimes we get two steps forward and one step back. But it's never a straight line. It's never easy. And I never promised easy. Easy has never been promised to us. But we've had faith. We have had faith. We've had that good kind of crazy that says, you can't stop marching.

Even when folks are hitting you over the head, you can't stop marching. Even when they're turning the hoses on you, you can't stop. Even when somebody fires you for speaking out, you can't stop. Even when it looks like there's no way, you find a way; you can't stop. Through the mud and the muck and the driving rain, we don't stop. Because we know the rightness of our cause, widening the circle of opportunity, standing up for everybody's opportunities, increasing each other's prosperity. We know our cause is just. It's a righteous cause.

So in the face of troopers and tear gas, folks stood unafraid. Led somebody like John Lewis to wake up after getting beaten within an inch of his life on Sunday, he wakes up on Monday: "We're going to go march."

Dr. King once said: "Before we reach the majestic shores of the promised land, there is a frustrating and bewildering wilderness ahead. We must still face prodigious hilltops of

opposition and gigantic mountains of resistance. But with patient and firm determination we will press on."

So I don't know about you, CBC, but the future rewards those who press on. With patient and firm determination, I am going to press on for jobs. I'm going to press on for equality. I'm going to press on for the sake of our children. I'm going to press on for the sake of all those families who are struggling right now. I don't have time to feel sorry for myself. I don't have time to complain. I am going to press on.

I expect all of you to march with me and press on. Take off your bedroom slippers, put on your marching shoes. Shake it off. Stop complaining, stop grumbling, stop crying. We are going to press on. We've got work to do, CBC.

God bless you, and God bless the United States of America.

NOTE: The President spoke at 8:30 p.m. at the Walter E. Washington Convention Center. In his remarks, he referred to Rep. Emanuel Cleaver II, chairman, and Rep. Donald M. Payne, former chairman, Congressional Black Caucus; and Warren E. Buffett, chief executive officer and chairman, Berkshire Hathaway Inc. He also referred to his mother-in-law Marian Robinson.

*Categories:* Addresses and Remarks : Congressional Black Caucus Foundation, Phoenix Awards dinner.

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*Subjects:* Agriculture, Department of : Pigford class-action lawsuit on discrimination, settlement; Budget, Federal : Deficit and national debt; Business and industry : Construction industry, decline; Congress : Congressional Black Caucus; Congressional Black Caucus Foundation; Economy, national : Financial regulations, modernization efforts; Economy, national : Household incomes, decline; Economy, national : Poverty :: Efforts to combat; Economy, national : Poverty :: Rate, increase; Economy, national : Recession, effects; Economy, national : Strengthening efforts; Education : Postsecondary education :: Affordability; Education : Postsecondary education :: Community colleges; Education : Postsecondary education :: Historically Black Colleges and Universities; Education : Postsecondary education :: Pell grants; Education : Postsecondary education :: Student loans, elimination of subsidies to private providers; Education : School improvement and renovation; Employment and unemployment : Job creation and growth; Employment and unemployment : Job losses; Employment and unemployment : Job training assistance; Employment and unemployment : Unemployment insurance; Employment and unemployment : Unemployment rate; Employment and unemployment : Young adults, employment opportunities; Health and medical care : Health insurance reforms; Taxation : Child tax credit; Taxation : Earned-income tax credit; Taxation : Payroll tax cut; Taxation : Tax Code, reform; Taxation : Tax relief; Transportation : Infrastructure, national, improvement efforts; Veterans : Hiring incentives.

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